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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 98 (2014) 1535 – 1540

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

Iranian EFL Learners' Proficiency Levels and Their Use of Apology Strategies

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of different proficiency levels on apology strategies that Iranian learners utilize when confronting apology situations. The participants included in this study were 16 students with different proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced level. The data were gathered through discourse completion test (DCT) which consisted of five apology situations and adapted from Tuncel (1999). The data were classified based on the categorization of Cohen and Olshtain (1981) and functional analysis was carried out. The results of the study demonstrated that students' proficiency levels had a significant effect on type and complexity of strategies used by the learners. Therefore, learners with high level of proficiency are more familiar with and inclined to use different apology strategies.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: communicative competence; apology strategies; speech act; proficiency level; EFL learners

1. Introduction

Recently, communicative competence has gained importance in the field of second language acquisition since it was introduced by Dell Hymes in 1960s. "Communicative Competence" at first was introduced by Dell Hymes (1967) as the ability of speakers to communicate properly in a specific context (Brown, 2000). In support of communicative competence, Brown (2000, p.250), stated that "communication is not merely an event, it is functional and purposive, and communication is a series of communicative acts or speech acts which are used to

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accomplish a particular purpose.” One important part of communicative competence is speech act. Speech act is a unit of language that is functional and has illocutionary meaning like orders, apologies, commands, thanking and complaints. Although Speech acts are universal around the world and all speakers with different languages use different kinds of speech acts, the devices that speakers with different cultures use to realize speech acts are not the same (Istifci & Kampusu, 2009). For example, Malaysian students do not use *Expression of Embarrassment* or *Denial of responsibility* to realize the speech act of apology but Iranian Learners use these strategies in confronting with apology situations (Farashaiyan & Yazdi, 2011). Using different devices to apologize can be rooted in differences in cultures (ibid, 2011). Moreover, Proficiency can affect strategies that learners use to apologize and even it can influence the transfer of L1 norms (Istifci & Kampusu, 2009). For example, intermediate level students are more probable to transfer their L1 cultural norms than advanced level students and it can be seen that advanced level students use the combination of several apology strategies more than the intermediate levels (ibid, 2009). The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of proficiency on strategies that Iranian learners use to apologize and transfer Iranian culture in their language usage. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Which strategies are used by Iranian learners with different foreign language proficiency to apologize?
2. Does the foreign language proficiency have any effects on the Iranian learners' cultural transfer in confronting with apology situations?

2. Review of literature

In order to investigate cross- cultural speech act realization pattern (CCSARP), Blum –kulka and Olshtain (1989), conducted a study to compare the realization pattern of two speech acts -request and apology- among different cultures (Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew, Russia). The results demonstrated that apology strategies that were used by different subjects are different based on their cultures and it was revealed that there was a cross-cultural variability.

In the same line, Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz (2011) compared the apology strategies applied by Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL learners in the same apology situations. Fifteen Iranian and fifteen Malaysian university students were chosen based on their TOEFL proficiency test at Malaysian universities of Putra, Kebangsaan and Malaya. The results indicated that there were significant differences and similarities of strategies used by Iranian and Malaysian learners. For example, some strategies like *request for forgiveness* were common among Iranian and Malaysian learners, but there were differences regarding the frequency of strategies. Farshaiyan and Amirkhiz (2011) attributed the differences to socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds of students and their L1 transfer.

Samavarchi and Allami (2012) in their study tried to investigate the realization pattern of speech act of giving condolence by Persian EFL learners and English native speakers. After collecting data through DCT, the results indicated that although the participants did not use the same condoling strategy in confronting with condoling situation which can be attributed to two different cultures, EFL Persian learners were under the influence of their own inter-language. Hence, if appropriate strategies in educational setting are employed, learners can acquire the speech acts successfully.

To address the pragmatic development of request strategies in Iranian EFL learners, Jalilfar (2009) in his study compared the requesting strategies which are used by Iranian EFL learners with strategies which native speakers of English use to request. The findings demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between language proficiency and the use of request strategies. Hence, Iranian learners with high proficiency tended to use more indirect request strategies like their English counterparts.

By means of DCT having 8 apology situations, Istifci & Kampusu (2009) conducted a study to investigate the effect of English proficiency on the speech act of apologizing. 20 intermediate EFL learners, 20 advanced EFL learners and 5 native speakers of English at Preparatory School of Anadolu University participated in this study. For data analysis, all responses were categorized based on Cohen & Olshtain's (1981) taxonomy. The results of the

study showed the existence of some similarities and differences between the two groups. The findings indicated that the advanced level subjects utilized native speaker apology strategies more than those in intermediate levels; however, L1 cultural norms have a role in apology speech act realizations.

By means of a questionnaire based on Sugimoto's (1995), Dadkhal et al. (2012) investigated the apology strategies that Iranian EFL students use in different situation and the effect of gender on this. The participants included forty randomly selected Persian Literature students at Isfahan University. The data were analyzed based on strategies used by Sugimoto (1997) and the results of the study showed that there was no significant difference regarding gender in utilizing of the apology strategies. Also, both male and female subjects showed the tendency toward using *the statement of remorse* more than other strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 16 EFL learners who were divided into four groups based on their proficiency levels (elementary, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced). All participants were studying Interchange series by Jack.C. Richards in Roham institute, Sari. The level of language proficiency of these subjects had been determined by the Institute itself. The subjects' ages ranged from 14-20.

3.2. Instrument

The data in the study gathered through discourse completion test (DCT) which was taken from Tunçel (1999) and it had been adapted from other DCTs used in literature (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). It had five apology situations and participants were asked to identify themselves with a character that made a mistake and apologize for their actions. Also DCT was preceded by a brief summary about cross-cultural varieties and strategies that speakers with different cultures use to realize the speech act pattern.

3.3. Procedure

The investigation of this study was an attempt to answer the questions dealing with proficiency and culture on apology strategies which are used by Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, 16 learners who were studying Interchange series at the same private English language institute were selected. After dividing participants into 4 groups based on their proficiency, the participants were provided with a brief summary about cross-cultural variety to prepare them for DCT. In the last phase, the DCT with 8 items applied to the participants and they were asked to put themselves in apology situations and use apology strategies.

3.4. Data analysis procedure

The categorization of Cohen and Olshtain (1981) used as a model for classification of data:

- 1) An expression of apology (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device IFID)
 - a. an expression of regret (e. g. I'm sorry)
 - b. an offer of apology (e.g. I apologize)
 - c. a request for forgiveness (e.g. excuse me, forgive me)
- 2) An offer of repair/redress (REPR) (e.g. I'll pay for your damage)
- 3) An explanation of an account (EXPL) (e.g. my daughter was ill, I took her to hospital)
- 4) Acknowledging responsibility for the offense (RESP) (e.g. it's my fault)
- 5) A promise of forbearance (FORB) (e.g. I'll never forget it again)

Also functional analysis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) was carried out:

- 1) Identification the specific function (apology)
- 2) Collection of learner's language sample where the function is performed.
- 3) Identification of different linguistic forms to perform the function.
- 4) Counting the frequency of use of each form used to realize function.

4. Results

The following table reveals the results of the study:

Table 1: The frequency of strategies that used by the respondents

<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Elementary level</i>	<i>Intermediate level</i>	<i>Upper-intermediate level</i>	<i>Advanced level</i>
IFID	40%	0%	5%	5%
EXPL	10%	5%	0%	0%
REPR	0%	0%	0%	5%
IFID+EXPL	40%	80%	45%	25%
IFID+RESP	10%	0%	10%	0%
IFID+REPR	0%	15%	30%	20%
IFID+RESP+PERP	0%	0%	10%	0%
IFID+FORB	0%	0%	0%	25%
IFID+EXPL+FORB	0%	0%	0%	5%
IFID+EXPL+REPR	0%	0%	0%	5%
IFID+RESP+FORB	0%	0%	0%	5%
IFID+FORB+REPR	0%	0%	0%	5%

As shown in table 1, there are some similarities and differences among Iranian learners with different foreign language proficiency levels to realize the speech act of apology. IFID was the most frequent strategy used by the respondents; nearly all of the respondents used IFID in almost all of the situations (97%). Explanation of an account (EXPL) was the next formula that was used by subjects to apologize for different situations (51%). The other strategies utilized by subjects were RESP (8.75%), REPR (22.5 %) which were not used by elementary level at all and FORB (7%) was utilized just by advanced level students. Although some strategies (IFID and EXPL) used nearly by all learners with different proficiency levels that can be attributed to Iranian cultural norms, the frequency of strategies and the kinds of formula were not the same in different groups. Elementary-level subjects used IFID 40% as a single formula, whereas upper- intermediate and advanced level used IFID 2%. EXPL as a single formula used 10% by elementary levels, and intermediate levels used EXPL 5%. However, upper-intermediate and advanced levels did not prefer EXPL as a single formula. Another formula was IFID+ EXPL that was employed 80% by intermediate level students; 45% by upper intermediate; 40% by elementary level, and 25% by advanced level students. The subjects in elementary and upper intermediate levels utilized IFID+RESP 10%, but other levels did not show any tendency in utilization of this formula. One formula that was not used at all by elementary levels was IFID+REPR but subjects of intermediate level used it 15%, upper- intermediates used it 30% and advanced levels used it 20%. IFID+RESP+REPR accounted for 10% just for upper-intermediate level. Also advanced level subjects were different from other subjects in their use of IFID+FORB (25%), IFID+EXPL+FORB (5%), IFID+EXPL+REPR(5%), IFID+RESP+FORB(5%), IFID+FORB+REPR (5 %) and REPR as a single formula(5%).

5. Conclusion

As stated before, the aim of this study was to investigate the effect of foreign language proficiency on the apology strategies that Iranian learners use and transfer their L1 norms. With regards to the first question of the study as to whether language proficiency has effect on the realization of apology strategies, it seems that advanced level subjects tended to use different combination of apology strategies and used complex formulas more than other groups. Regarding the second research question, the results of the study suggested that there were some strategies which were used by nearly all learners like IFID which is common in Iranian culture in their response to apology situations. Summing up the results, there is a relationship between foreign language proficiency, culture, and the use of apology strategies. As it shows, the proficiency of learners cannot eliminate the role of L1 in the target language production completely; however, it can have an effect on the frequency and combination of apology strategies which are used by EFL learners. So this study confirmed the results of the previous ones (Blum –kulka & Olshtain, 1989; Istifci & Kampusu, 2009, and Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz, 2011) which investigated the effects of culture and proficiency on the realization of apology strategies. Considering the results, it became clear that both proficiency and L1 norms affect the use of apology strategies.

From a pedagogical point of view, it can be said that even though L1 norms have effect on strategies which are used by EFL learners, proficiency has effect on the pragmatic competence. So, being in exposure of target language instruction can help learners to attain pragmatic competence.

It also should be mentioned that the findings of this study can be generalized hardly because of the size of population which was small and only the male students who were studying at the same private language institute participated in this study. Another limitation was the lack of one standard language proficiency test to guarantee the language proficiency of the subjects. It is suggested that future studies consider these limitations and take into account different variables on the realization of speech acts.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Test

Imagine the situations and complete YOU parts:

1. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks: Boss : "What happened to you?"

You:

2. You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him to apologize. This is really the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the telephone Friend: "What happened?"

You:

3. You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, but you did not.

You:

4. Spending an evening at a friend's apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her.

You:

5. You have forgotten to return the book you borrowed from your teacher.

You: